



Project improves public safety efficiency ***Emergency services in Fergus County will benefit***

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Imagine an emergency situation where trained responders and resources are available to address the situation – potentially even saving lives – but outdated radio systems prevent responders from communicating with each other or with their dispatch center. That situation is an unfortunate reality in communities across the country. However, thanks to the dedicated efforts of local governments and volunteers, the situation is beginning to improve here in Montana. The Interoperability Montana (IM) project is changing the way emergency responders across the state are able to communicate with each other, with mutual aid agencies, with dispatch centers, and with hospitals and other facilities.

The Interoperability Montana project

The Interoperability Montana project is improving public safety communications across the state. These improvements serve to increase the safety of emergency personnel, have the potential to save lives and, perhaps best of all, are being developed in a manner as unique as Montana.

According to the Interoperability Montana project Web site (<http://interop.mt.gov>), the interoperability project seeks to assess communication needs in Montana, define an appropriate radio system, and implement the system in a phased approach while sharing costs and infrastructure among various governments. Kevin Bruski, executive director of the non-profit, inter-governmental association Interoperability Montana, and Alan Michaels, chief of police in Glendive and chairman of the Interoperability Montana Project Directors, recently published a paper explaining Interoperability Montana. Bruski and Michaels define interoperability as “the ability to communicate across physical barriers, such as mountains, or across political boundary lines. It also means communicating over different radio technologies.”

The Interoperability Montana (IM) project is a significant move forward in public safety in Montana. The ability of emergency responders and personnel to communicate with each other is essential if they are to do their jobs effectively.

Bruski and Michaels highlight some of the important reasons why we need interoperability in Montana: “First and foremost, it will allow emergency responders to communicate with each other – and with their dispatchers – across more of the landscape. In many counties, IM is eliminating ‘dead spots’ that have hindered communications for years. Local ambulances will have constant radio contact with dispatchers and hospitals during long-distance transports. Disaster responders can call in help more easily from the state or from adjacent counties.”

The idea of interoperability has been discussed in Montana for 20 years. However, the existing radio systems were developed for local usage and were often incompatible with other systems in adjacent areas.

Interoperability deemed important after 9/11

Following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, interoperability became a national priority. Responders were often hindered in their efforts to provide help after the terrorist attacks because their communications systems were incompatible with other responders and dispatch centers. In 2004 several Montana agencies came together to address interoperability. Nine consortiums were ultimately formed to address the needs of the entire state, while retaining local management. Fergus County is part of the Central Montana Interoperable Communications Consortium.

Montana's interoperability project uses a microwave transmission network for voice and data communications. Automated controllers operate transmitters and receivers placed on strategically located towers. This system will allow system users to communicate with other system users, even when in another part of the state.

Montana adopts unique community-centered approach

All 56 states and territories in the U.S. have developed interoperable communications plans that have been approved by the Department of Homeland Security. Montana, however, is unique in its approach to interoperability.

Most states have developed interoperability projects that are "top down," and based on a centralized, bureaucratic model. Montana created nine "Interoperability Consortia" composed of counties and sovereign Indian nations that are responsible for developing interoperability plans at a local level. The Interoperability Montana organization "is the core coordination organization for the project and will continue to coordinate the operations and maintenance of the system to ensure a high level of service for the users of the system," Bruski explained.

As a result of this approach, Montana has made more progress for less money than most states, according to Bruski and Michaels. Bruski expanded on this statement by contrasting Interoperability Montana with the WyoLink project in Wyoming.

WyoLink is built with the same technology as IM, but is managed by the State of Wyoming. Wyoming, which had the majority of the necessary backbone in place to begin with, has spent \$80 million to \$90 million to add the new technology. Montana's IM project, which needed to build towers, shelters, and microwave connectivity to almost all sites, has spent only \$66 million to date.

Bruski said Montana's success with the IM project demonstrates that "local jurisdictions can work together to develop a system that is far less expensive than a state-owned system. There are a lot of members of this system that will go out and roll up their sleeves to get the job done, that's the difference. The Interoperability Montana project is the only one in the U.S. that is locally managed."

"We Montanans know how to work together," he said.

Kilby represents consortium

Montana is also the only state that has partnered together with nearly every federal agency for radio communications infrastructure. Fergus County's Disaster and Emergency Services Coordinator, Cheri Kilby, who also serves as an IM project director, said this partnership is working in Fergus County as well. The Air Force has a microwave tower at the South Moccasin site that allows them to communicate with another air base in Colorado. The Air Force microwave system is shared by IM.

Fergus County has already benefited from the project, according to Kilby. Fergus County has two new communications towers – one at Judith Peak and another at South Moccasin. Both sites have new towers, shelters and generators. The new 150-foot towers are also higher than the old towers. An Alaskan Bench tower may be added at a later date if it proves necessary.

Public safety personnel and residents in Fergus County will benefit from the interoperability project in several ways. Kilby explained that ambulances are already able to communicate with Central Montana Medical Center, but have difficulty communicating with hospitals in Great Falls or Billings when transporting patients to those locations. Interoperability will allow local ambulances to communicate with regional hospitals.

Local fire departments are trained to handle many situations, including hazardous materials situations. However, should a major situation arise, the nearest of Montana's six regional hazardous materials teams is located in Great Falls. The next closest is in Billings. Kilby said it would be a minimum wait of two hours for a regional hazardous materials team to arrive in Fergus County with specialized equipment. The ability of local fire departments to communicate with the hazardous materials team by radio before their arrival would be fantastic, Kilby said. This type of communications between different agencies is possible with interoperability.

Quite a few people in Fergus County are involved in the Interoperability Montana project because they recognize the potential, Kilby said. The Fergus County Commissioners also support the project as long as good financial responsibility is involved. Kilby said she would not be as involved in IM were it not for the County Commissioners' support of the project.

Looking forward: greater interoperability

Kilby said the IM project should result in approximately 95 percent communications coverage statewide. Some wilderness areas are expected to still be without coverage.

Bruski said the IM project is currently about 35 percent complete. Work will continue this season with more counties being added. The date when the project may be completed is still being evaluated, he said.

Nearly every county in Montana supports the IM project, though a few still have concerns about the project.

"Montana is a large geographical state with a wide diversity of needs. As we build out the system, we will be working with all counties to make sure that the communications needs of their emergency responders are met," Bruski said.

Bruski said Interoperability Montana's goal "is to build a system for all Public Safety to use without artificial boundaries."

Bruski continues to get calls from agencies that are interested in using the IM system; he said everyone that understands the system, and who knows what benefits the system will provide, is anxious to use the system. Bruski cited Lewis and Clark County as an example. The Lewis and Clark system started with a system designed for 400 users, but was later expanded because nearly 2,000 users are now on the system.

"That in itself tells the story," he said.

Sustaining interoperability

As could be expected, these interoperability improvements do not come cheap. A total of \$66 million has been invested in Montana's interoperability project so far, and much work remains to be done before the system is complete. The project has utilized 23 different funding sources thus far. Bruski said IM has "close to 50 percent of the funding available now and we are still working to secure the remaining funding required through our congressional delegation, state and local members."

Senator Jon Tester has requested an additional \$1 million from the Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies subcommittee for fiscal year 2011; however, this is only the first step in the budget process so it is not known whether the funding request will be granted.

Work continues on the development of a long-term sustainability plan. Bruski noted that sustainability funding requires public officials to look at all possible funding sources.

"Tax revenue is one of the funding sources that is being considered," he said.

Bruski also noted that several project members already have funds budgeted for covering costs in their area. Bruski added that IM is managed bottom-up and that "counties that are moving forward with the project will come together to support each other to keep their system running."

Development of the Interoperability Montana project has not been without challenges and obstacles for those involved in the project. However, the convenience of the system far outweighs the obstacles, Kilby said. As Bruski also observed, "No Public Safety official should lose his or her life because they could not communicate with each other!" Interoperability Montana, utilizing an approach that is as unique as Montana itself, is improving the state's public safety system to benefit every Montanan.